

Las Vegas

By Lt. Tony Rodgers

It was my first Red Flag exercise, and I was looking forward to getting to Vegas. I had heard all the stories about bright lights, big city, and lots of parties. Of course, the flying was supposed to be fun, too. Our plan was to take off early from Whidbey, as a division of three Prowlers. I was in the back seat of Dash 3 with a disgruntled senior pilot who had been relegated to the back because the skipper thought the junior pilots could use the experience. To add insult to injury, the skipper was flying our jet. My pilot buddy just wanted to get this over with and get out of the back seat.

The first two aircraft did a section go, and we followed 10 seconds later. As the skipper climbed away from the deck, he raised the gear, and we were off to Las Vegas. We quickly realized we weren't going anywhere when the skipper announced we had a barber-poled nose-gear indication. The lead section quickly was leaving us behind, as we remained below gear speed. The lead section was sent on as we transitioned our aircraft to a good three-down-and-locked indication. We would land, get the problem fixed, and be right behind them. After all, it was probably just a stuck microswitch, no big deal.

I was quizzing my salty-pilot guest about how long it would take to change out a microswitch. He assured me we easily would get to Las Vegas by early afternoon. The crew worked through the unsafe-gear checklist and came to the step that called for an arrested landing. We dumped fuel to lighten the aircraft.

In the back seat, my buddy and I were grumbling about the added delay of an arrested landing. Furthermore, we had to wait for an LSO to get on station—another 20 minutes—as we proceeded to circle offshore. This really was cutting into my gambling time. Finally, when the LSO arrived on station, we called for

our approach. The LSO asked us to make a low pass so he could confirm the gear were down. All this because of a stupid microswitch!

We made our low pass, and the LSO informed us everything looked good and cleared us to bring it in. As we engaged the cable, the plane began veering to the left, and I thought it was a slightly off-center arrestment. At that moment, we heard the frontseaters ask, “What was that?” followed by a tower call, telling us that something had flown off our aircraft at touchdown. The LSO also saw something leave our plane as we hit the deck. As this took place, both of us backseaters looked out the canopy in disbelief. Had we just seen one of our front nosewheels come flying out of the sky and land on the right side of the runway? We watched it shoot ahead as we slowed from the arrestment. The wheel continued to roll down the runway about 1,000 feet until it finally stopped next to an unsuspecting coyote. We couldn't believe it. One of the frontseaters commented, “For a second there, I thought we had lost a hubcap.”

As the engines were shut down and the crash crew arrived to pin the gear, we climbed down to assess what had happened. What we saw was one left nosewheel missing and the



Or Bust!




Photo by Ted Carlson
Photo manipulated

right wheel straining under the pressure of a 45,000-pound Prowler.

Several hours later, the nosewheel was replaced, and we proceeded to Las Vegas. Looking back on the situation, I realized how impatience could have caused a major mishap. Had we not taken the arrested landing, we could have veered off the runway on touchdown and severely damaged the aircraft. We had taken our time and followed NATOPS. We underestimated the seriousness of our problem when we dismissed our lead element. We are taught as students to maintain section integrity and assist as needed during a wingman's

emergency. Our wingman could have spotted something wrong under our aircraft and helped us determine the magnitude of our emergency. Instead, we assumed it was a microswitch malfunction, common in EA-6Bs, and sent them on their way. We had discussed making a normal landing since we indicated three-down and locked, but we chose to stick with the checklist.

NATOPS procedures are there for a reason, and impatience is never a good reason to deviate from them. Experience in the cockpit overrode impulse. Gamble in Las Vegas but not with your life. 

Lt. Rodgers flies with VAQ-134.